Ana Vujanović

Notes on the Politicality of Contemporary Dance

The connection between politics and dance is one of the most discussed topics in the performing arts today. Before I take a closer look at what constitutes this link, I will introduce some epistemic and social frameworks within which we can speak of politics when we speak about contemporary performance and art in general. Then, I will continue with a discussion of the characteristic modalities of politicality that I register on the actual international dance scene.

To begin with, I want to emphasize that my focus in this text will not be a particular politics of contemporary dance. Rather, I want to concentrate on the problematics of *politicality* as the aspect of an artwork or art practice that addresses the ways it acts and intervenes in the public sphere. In doing so, politicality implies discussions about and conflicts around topics such as the subjects and objects that perform in a public sphere, the arrangement of positions and power relations among them, the *distribution of the sensible*, and the ideological discourses that shape a common symbolic and sensorial order of society, which affects its material structure and partitions. Therefore, my aim here is neither to advocate political art nor to divide dance performances into socio-politically engaged ones on the one hand and l'art-pour-l'art practices on the other hand. Instead, I would like to stress the necessity to think a broad and complex *grid of politicality* as an aspect that characterizes each and every performance – be it political or apolitical, resistant or complicit, transformative or servile – as a social event that is practiced in public.

Why is there such a preoccupation with the political in art today?

During the 20th century the development of the mass media has contested art's visibility in the public sphere. Furthermore, the general aestheticization of everyday life has deprived art of its almost exclusive claim on the aesthetic sphere. Taking into account the historically marginal place of art in society, the question of why we should deal with the politicality of dance and performance at all is a pressing one. To answer it requires a broader rethinking of both the concept of politics and the idea of art as a social practice. Trying to think this question beyond metaphorical terms and metaphysical verifications, I will straightforwardly – and thus to a certain extent schematically –

introduce some critical theses both on the relocation and disappearance of politics and on the politicization of art in the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries.

According to Hannah Arendt,[1] since the French Revolution politics in modern Western society has been more and more preoccupied with social questions. Its care about material goods and resources has therefore brought it close to the economical sphere and private interests. For Arendt, the socialization of politics with its economic concerns means the end of politics in its pure sense. Her view of pure politics relies on the Greek legacy of political activity and thought – on the Athenian democracy and Aristotle's writings, first of all – where politics was a type of human activity called *praxis*. In its original sense, praxis is not oriented toward existential needs (like ordinary human labour), nor (as opposed to *poiesis*, production, work, making) does it result in material objects as contributions to civilization. It is realized and exhausted solely in itself, affecting actual social relations. Therefore, politics as a praxis is a voluntary public activity of action and speech motivated neither by an existential necessity nor by an interest in material goods, but by the concern of the free human being as a political being (the Athenian *citizen)* with the aim of defining relationships between people. From this standpoint, economic and other private interests belong to the household and should stay there. As soon as they enter the public sphere they instrumentalize politics, which leads to its end.

This far-reaching critique of politics in modern Western capitalist societies has several widely discussed *blind spots*. What is important in this context is that Arendt's critique lacks a more careful consideration of the relationship between the economic and the political spheres that today obviously interrelate from the start. At the same time, Arendt's insight challenges the entire paradigm of artistic production based on poiesis by the concept of performance as a potential artistic praxis.[2] For instance, in her book *Between Past and Future* she explains:

> [In] the performing arts (as distinguished from the creative art of making), the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it. [...] The performing arts, on the contrary, have indeed a strong affinity with politics. Performing artists – dancers, play-actors, musicians and the like – need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their 'work', and both depend upon others for the performance itself.[3]

However, this elaboration again lacks more careful and more historically determined consideration of the changed notions of poiesis, praxis, and art, and their new relations under the current state of capitalism.[4]

To go beyond Arendt's perspective, I would like to introduce the theses proposed by the Italian post-Operaist thinkers like Maurizio Lazzarato, Antonio Negri, and Paolo Virno, who explain the disappearance of politics differently. As this theory centres on the concept of immaterial labour, their point of departure is the very fact that the borders of politics and economy, or of praxis and poiesis today become increasingly blurred. This blurring is actually how they answer the question that was left unanswered by Arendt: How do we practice politics and where is it located today, after it has ceased to be a specific social activity? According to them, Western post-industrial post-Fordist production already integrates elements of political practice. Hence the disappearance of politics actually means that the political activity is now subsumed under other social activities ranging from economy to culture and art.[5] Virno writes:

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1 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and also further reflections in *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1991).

2 An elaborated critical answer to this challenge can be found in the work of the Austrian group WochenKlausur; see: http://www.wochenklausur.at/, especially "From the Object to the Concrete Intervention", http://www.wochenklausur.at/kunst.php?lang=en, Access: 26 March 2011.

3 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future; Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), p. 153 f.

4 For further elaborations on this see: Giorgio Agamben, "Poiesis and Praxis", "Privation Is Like a Face", in *The Man Without Content* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 68–94, pp. 59–68. As Agamben's theses would be a digression on my main topic here I only want to mention that they show that a *return to praxis* today won't re-politicize art, as the practice is not that what it was in Ancient Greece, but is – already from the 19th century onwards – conceived as an expression of individual human will and creative forces; see also: Ana Vujanović, "What do we actually do when... make art", *Maska* 127–130 & *Amfiteatar* 2 (2010)

5 E.g. Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labour", http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm (30 March 2011); "Le renouvellement du concept de production et ses sémiotiques" (Chapter 1), http://www.howtodothingsbytheory.info/2010/06/22/public-editing-3-reference-text_1-le-renouvellement-du-concept-de-production-et-ses-semiotiques/ (30 March 2011); Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004).

I believe that in today's forms of life one has a direct perception of the fact that the coupling of the terms public-private, as well as the coupling of the terms collective-individual, can no longer stand up on their own, that they are gasping for air, burning themselves out. This is just like what is happening in the world of contemporary production, provided that production – loaded as it is with *ethos*, culture, linguistic interaction – not give itself over to econometric analysis, but rather be understood as a broad-based experience of the world.[6]

In his text *Immaterial Labour* Lazzarato explains that the core of contemporary capitalist production, a production that is based on immaterial labour, is not the production of the commodity but the production of cultural-informational content of this commodity. Therefore, the central questions of economy or, in a wider sense, of production are questions concerning the configuration of the social situation by communication and collaboration, whose principal content is the *production of subjectivity*. Especially in the progressive cultural-artistic field such claims are often regarded as promising for claiming the politicality of art, as they appear to suggest a simple equation: art is political insofar as it belongs to the domain of immaterial work that comprises politics. However, I want to argue against this easy equation, which, to me, is deeply problematic. Immaterial labour can only be political at the expense of its implications in the post-Fordist market of ideas. This configuration of the social is almost entirely capitalized, thus simulating the political rather than opening up a new space for political discussion.

Next to Hannah Arendt and the post-Operaists, the third important perspective on the relationship between art and politics can be found in Jacques Rancière's considerations of politics and aesthetics.[7] It is widely known that Rancière's understanding of politics as the distribution of the sensible (*le partage du sensible*) addresses issues of framing or reframing public space as a common space in which certain bodies have a part and others do not, and in which certain images and voices can be seen and heard and others cannot. Hence politics as the distribution of the sensible is about a conflictual shaping of the sphere of common sensorial experience or, to put it differently, of the "common sensorium", i.e. what is sensed as common for a

6 Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, p. 26.

7 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The distribution of the sensible* (New York: Continuum, 2004); and *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

certain social community. Rancière's concept of the politics of aesthetics derives from this standpoint, without, however, referring to Walter Benjamin's well-known observation on the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of art. For Rancière, aesthetics is at the very core of politics as a (re)distribution of the sensible. Likewise art always has a political dimension, since "[a]rtistic practices are 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility."[8]

However, this does not mean that art *is* politics, but it certainly means that starting from this point we could and should differentiate in concrete cases if its politicality is carried out as *police* or *politics*, namely as a contribution to the existing distribution of the sensible (policy / police), or as a critical intervention into it (politics).

Thus we have arrived at the degree zero of thinking the issue of art-and-politics and its attractiveness to contemporary critical thought. Although the viewpoints briefly introduced above are divergent, we can conclude from them all that today the relation of art *to* politics as something outside the field of art collapses more and more. Instead, art becomes itself embedded within the political, and thus turns into one of the training grounds or battlegrounds for the political practices of Western societies.

Modalities of politicality in contemporary dance

In this section I will focus on how the political is practiced by and in dance today. I would like to draw your attention to three dominant modalities, which could be seen both as the perspectives of interpretation used by critics and theoreticians and the artistic strategies or tactics employed by the artists themselves. In any case, I want to stress that they rarely exist in pure forms or separated from each other. Because of this, the grid I am going to develop cannot be used for the classification of performances, but only to broaden and sharpen our assessment of their politicality.

8 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 13.

1. *Political content and the concept of engaged performance*

The first modality is based on the idea that dance as art is a specific type of social discourse. As such it has the capacity to *speak* about social subjects and critical issues such as inequality, intolerance, militarism, misogyny, dictatorship, fascism, racism, etc. In this sense, the role of the (political) performance is to raise public awareness and to function as a critical commentary on a particular social problem. Accordingly, the medium of performance is not deemed to be an important factor of its politicality. Moreover, it is considered as a mere formal aspect of the dance piece, which is neutral and in itself relieved from political *messages*. Therefore, the medium is capable of conveying different messages coming from the content of the performance.

This modality is not a new one. It has already existed since the early decades of the 20th century in various performing arts practices and works that considered the political primarily in terms of contents, themes, or subjects. The conception might be found both in modernism – including also some segments of the historical avant-garde and neo-avant-garde in the '60s – and, on the other hand, in Socialist realism, the political and workers' theatre and dance.[9] This inherently divergent scope seems paradoxical, but is not. The crucial idea that enables all these different practices to understand the political in this way is that of the representational character of art together with its exceptional status in society. Consequently, from the perspective of this mode of politicality, dance could be divided into politically engaged dance and *l'art pour l'art* dance. While engaged dance deals directly with social-political issues, the latter conceives of the dance discipline as an autonomous field of human creativity, individual expression, and emancipation of the individual body, which was seen as free from the social infra-structure and functionality.

In any case, a politically critical remark is that both categories are bound to the idea of the privileged, *transcendental* status of dance as art, which is from this outside position able to speak about society and politics – or *prefers not to* do so. What both positions neglect is that art is given its exceptional status only by virtue of social authority. Therefore, art here takes its status for granted and in this way it limits its political potential never contesting itself as a social practice. An illustrative example of this modality and its shortcomings are numerous contemporary dance works that speak critically about either the structure of contemporary dance institution or relations between the First World and the rest of the world, the EU and the rest of Europe, while at the same time touring through the EU supported by the dance institutions.

However, this first modality of the political has some advantages that are worth mentioning. I would remark that some historical forms of dance, such as mime, pantomime, and choreo-drama, have been a way of *speaking* critically or subversively about certain social issues when these issues were forbidden or censored. For instance, first choreo-dramas appeared in Rome in 1806–08 during Napoleon's invasion of Italy. They were created by Gaetano Gioia as short dance pieces smuggled into the breaks between opera acts, which spoke about burning socio-political topics of the time. Also the popularity of pantomime in France after the Revolution was directly conditioned by the rigorous censorship of the theatre. In fact, pantomime was practiced and became popular as a form of public criticism without the risk of openly using political texts. So we can see that at times when it was forbidden to speak about certain social issues, this modality of politicality was useful because dance could express these issues in a language (or more precisely, a 'semiotic system') that the police supposedly didn't understand, and hence dance could smuggle them into public discourse.

2. *Politicality of the performance medium: its materiality and discursive dispositifs*

The second modality focuses on the medium of dance performance itself, its materiality, form, and organization, when it comes to formulating a certain politicality. This modality also has a long history, but was articulated in contemporary terms mostly in the 1960s and '70s within the then newly emerging theoretical platform in the social sciences and the humanities: (post-)structuralism. The foundational concepts here are the concept of writing (*écriture*) and the critique of logocentrism (Derrida, Barthes), the materiality of the signifier and of the signifying practice (Barthes, Kristeva, Lacan), intertextuality (Kristeva), discursive practice (Foucault), ideological interpellation and interdiscourse (Althusser, Pêcheux), and the concept of expression (Deleuze, Guattari).

9 See an explicit confrontation of Brecht's and Piscator's political theatre with Dadaist formal experiments around the question of politicality of performance in Erwin Piscator, "The Proletarian Theatre: Its Fundamental Principles and its Tasks" (1920), ed. Ludwig Hoffmann, *Erwin Piscator: Political Theatre, 1920–1966, exhibition catalogue* (London: Arts Council, 1971), pp. 41–44. In the field of dance of that time, Kurt Jooss' *Tanztheater* or Jean Weidt's 'red dancer' poetic, for instance, might be seen as paradigmatic for this modality.

Claiming that the medium of performance is political in itself implies that the signifier can never be a neutral mediator or vehicle of any meaning, content, or message pertaining to the performance. It indicates that discourse is itself a social materiality, that on the one hand intervenes into its content – the idealistic realm of the signified – by its signifying practice, and that, on the other hand, in a Foucauldian tradition, shapes our bodies, behavior, and social relations.[10] Therefore, the medium of performance is not and cannot be politically neutral regardless of its contributions to arranging the public sphere on the level of content. Moreover, the performance may not disclose any particular political content and still maintain a political potency if its medium can contest the legitimized production of signifiers, signifying orders, and habitualised orders of perception and reception, or even introduce new ones. It is an especially important modality for dance, since it reveals that the very images of the body, its positions, shapes, movements, and relations on stage could oppose and subvert the dominant ideological interpellations by offering critical alternatives to them.

To sum up, one can say that for this modality of politicality the question of *how* is more important than *what* (is said). The 'how' comprises issues like: who is speaking / acting, in which context, from which position, in which relation to the object, and how speech and action are organized.

This framework provides us with a strong tool for thinking the politicality of dance even in the cases traditionally seen as politically indifferent or apolitical. Speaking historically, one can say that, for instance, the (post-)minimal dance of the Judson Church Dance Company (Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, etc.) practiced an emancipatory politics without saying a word on political themes.[11] It was clearly engaged in democratization, individual liberation, and emancipation *in the spirit of the '60s* by the problematization of inherited images of dance, body, and techniques, and by offering critical alternatives to them, by introducing for example pedestrian bodies and movements which were inclusive ('democratic') and non-virtuoso.

Today, we could approach the choreographies by Xavier Le Roy, Jérôme Bel, Bad.co and Nikolina Bujas Pristaš, Bojana Mladenović, Juan Dominguez, Vera Mantero, Mette Ingvartsen, Eduard Gabia,

10 See a consistent analysis of the socio-political practice of the artistic signifiers in: Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar, Rastko Močnik, Danijel Levski, Jure Mikuž, "Umetnost, družba/tekst" ("Art, Society/Text"), *Problemi-Razprave* 3–5 (1975).

11 See also in Ramsay Burt, "Dance, History, and Political Relevance", *Maska* 82–83 (2003).

Eszter Salamon, Ivo Dimčev, and many others from this perspective. According to André Lepecki, they all interrupt the *flow of movement* with, for instance, *still-acts* or the *discursive materiality of the body*.[12] This particular 'betrayal' is worth mentioning here as it challenges the modern dance paradigm of *movement*, which obtains a political dimension by the fact that it is the very paradigm of modernity and modern subjectivity in the Western world. The question is whether 'the interruption in or of movement' as a critique of modernist subjectivity makes (political) sense in a post-socialist Europe that was excluded from the post-war Western modernism; and if so, which one? This would require an extensive discussion which exceeds the scope of this article. Instead, I can only briefly note here that, seen from this angle, we could read the boom of contemporary dance in the East during the 1990s and 2000s – again, regardless of content and theme of a particular dance piece – as a post-socialist celebration of the individual body and its *(neo-)liberty* which comes after the long period of training in anonymous mass discipline and collectivism and whose political proposition is neo-liberal individualism.

3. *Politicality of modes of work / production*

The third and last mode of the politicality of dance in its current terms is the result of an intersection of post-Operaist theories and bio-politics on the one hand and cultural-activist initiatives connected to digital technologies, particularly the Internet, on the other. In these frameworks the problematics of work become one of the crucial political questions of contemporary Western societies. As they represent societies shaped by a growing domination of post-industrial economy and immaterial labour, as already mentioned above, art, culture, and creative industries become central theoretical concerns, even though they are (mis)recognized as the avant-garde or the places of "silent revolution" of society.[13] Furthermore, from free software and open source through Hacktivism to Copy Left and creative commons licenses, digital and Internet cultures generate many new-leftist practices that invite artists to pay political attention to the conditions, protocols, and procedures of their working processes.

12 See André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the politics of movement* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006).

13 See Lazzarato's own re-thinking in "Conversation with Maurizio Lazzarato", *TkH* 17 & *Le Journal des Laboratoires*: "Exhausting Immaterial Labour in Performance" (2010), pp. 12–17.

Hence, in the contemporary performing arts – whose paradigm today is dance with its new infrastructure – current reference points pertaining to politicality comprise the questions of property and licensing, technology of authorship, principles of sharing, position of performance in the exchange economy and market, production and distribution of knowledge, organization of artistic collectives, mechanisms of decision making, collaboration, and networking. These issues are not new at all, but this new perspective on them allows us to see them precisely as political questions and not only as questions purely related to the production of a piece. Moreover, in those terms, modes of dance production acquire an almost higher political priority than either content or form. They are inevitably inscribed in the performance, articulating the dance piece's positioning in public and even re-reading the political dimension of its content or form.

On the grounds of such an understanding of politicality, we could for instance criticize the *guru-system* of the alternative neo-avant-garde performance groups (such as Performance Group, Living Theatre, etc.), whose organisation keeps the principles of leadership and hierarchies while the content of their pieces speaks out against authorities and is therefore considered to be revolutionary and liberating. From this perspective, we could radicalize Virno's thesis that many of these once disobedient practices have easily found their place in a post-Fordist type of company. We could see that they mainly replaced obedience to official authorities with a kind of voluntary, internalized obedience – which is exactly what post-Fordist management tries to achieve today.

On the other hand, several recent dance works and projects – like Everybody's platform, *Collect-if* by Emil Hrvatin, Bojana Cvejić, et al., Steal this dance! by Lucky Plush production, Mette Ingvartsen's *The making of the making of*, or Tino Sehgal's actions of selling his performances – are driven by the critical consideration of the questions of sharing methodologies, structures of collaboration, intellectual property and value of dance, research methods, and negotiations with the normal-and-normative cycles of production and consumption of dance pieces and choreographies. However, when we speak about their politicality in these terms we need to distinguish the individual economic interests of those involved in the "immaterial civil war" in the field of contemporary cultural production[14] from the artistic concerns for interventions into the given working conditions and in the mechanisms by which they produce subjectivity.

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14 Matteo Pasquinelli, "Immaterial Civil War; Prototypes of Conflict within Cognitive Capitalism", 2006, http://eipcp.net/policies/cci/pasquinelli/en (30 March 2011).

Speaking from a macro-perspective, the contemporary international dance scene mostly works according to the principles of the tertiary sector of neo-liberal capitalism, and therefore functions as a training ground of post-industrial economy. This has recently been discussed elsewhere.[15] Therefore I only sum up the discussion by emphasizing that the celebration of the new modes of production by dance practitioners including nomadism, flexibility, multi-tasking personalities, collaboration, and endless networking is paradoxical. These modes are responsible for turning artists' lives into an increasingly precarious existence. Perhaps even more importantly from the perspective I am developing here, the celebration of these modes makes them politically opportunistic. While believing in the progressiveness of their modes of work, dance practitioners in fact become complicit with neo-liberal ideology, whose investment is precisely in post-industrial capitalist production that merely simulates public discussions.

I find this polemical comment adequate for closing my methodological framing of the topic and for opening up a space for further elaborations. The comment indicates that when one deals with the politicality of art, one must consider precisely its relationships to a given social context, comprising the ruling polices, dominant public discourses and their agencies, and current discussions. Without these specifications, political labels such as leftist, rightist, communist, capitalist, democratic, nationalist, liberal, etc. are of reduced significance. This seems particularly important for the issue of the politicality of performing arts, which I find both full of potential and at the same time elusive, since performance and politics are ambiguously close to each other in sharing the same actuality and self-exhaustion in public.

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15 See Mårten Spångberg, "Overwhelming, The Doing of Research", in *The Adventure* (Vienna: ImpulsTanz, 2006): pp. 33–47; Bojana Cvejić, "Collectivity? You Mean Collaboration?", 2005, http://republicart.net/disc/aap/cvejic01_en.htm (30 March 2011); Bojana Kunst, "Prognosis on Collaboration", Marko Kostanić, "Art and Labour", *TkH* 17 & *Le Journal des Laboratoires*: pp. 20–30, pp. 36–40.

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Gerald Siegmund and Stefan Hölscher

Introduction

Moving Times

The past ten years have seen a re-emergence of the need to think about and conceptualise the arts in general and dance in particular in terms of the political. Developments in globalised neo-liberal capitalism and the changes it has produced in the social fabric seem to beg for a statement of some kind from the artistic field. What is more, these changes increasingly affect the production and reception of dance itself, thereby laying bare the ideological underpinnings of its claim for artistic freedom and criticality. If Eve Chiapello is right in claiming that the current state of capitalist development has appropriated the artists' critique of the social and its demand for freedom into its very own mode of operation, the arts are indeed in a conundrum.[1] The freedom of the artists, so it seems, equals the freedom of globalised capital and its modes of production. It comes as no surprise, then, that re-thinking the relation of dance and politics is high on the agenda of dance practitioners and scholars alike. Recent developments in the world economy suggest that Michel Foucault's concept of "governmentality" of self, other and society, which he developed in his lecture series between 1977 and 1979, is more pertinent than ever.[2] Whereas the citizens of the one world have involuntarily become bearers and shares of incalculable risks, the frontiers to the other world are protected more and more rigorously. Examples of this are the overflowing refugee camps on the southern Italian coast as well as international airports that resemble high security prisons searching and registering masses of bodies in their microstructures with new technological devices. While one part of the world population deterritorialises itself voluntarily, the other part is forcibly prevented from entering this space, which is defined by its increasing mobility, acceleration, and high speed communication highways. Neoliberal dispositifs of power are linked with technologies to secure and enclose territories, discourses and bodies whose general

1 Eve Chiapello, "Evolution und Kooption. Die 'Künstlerkritik' und der normative Wandel", in Christoph Menke und Juliane Rebentisch, eds., *Kreation und Depression. Freiheit im gegenwärtigen Kapitalismus* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2010), pp. 38–51.
2 Michel Foucault, *Sicherheit, Territorium, Bevölkerung. Geschichte der Gouvernementalität I* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2006); Michel Foucault, *Die Geburt der Biopolitik. Geschichte der Gouvernementalität II* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2006).